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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that secondary social studies teachers should draw illustrations and insights from creative writers such as Willa Cather, particularly when teaching about leadership, heroism, deviation, and innovation. Traditionally, social scientists have proceeded deductively describing human behavior in terms of averages, norms, and frequency distributions. But some social scientists have criticized the deductive approach because it fails to recognize and appreciate the exceptional person--the heroic individual who innovates, leads, creates, or resists. As a result some social scientists recommend an inductive approach to the study of human behavior--an approach which seeks to learn from the exceptional individual. Such an approach may come closer to revealing the intricacies of human motivations and behaviors. The study of Willa Cather's themes can lead inductively to a better understanding of human behavior at its best. Willa Cather explores and honors the exceptional person. In "My Antonia" and "O Pioneers" she personalized the history of pioneer Nebraska by revealing the individual anguish and resolve which tamed the land. In "A Wagner Matinee," she honored the grace of a pioneer woman who gave thirty years to the harsh struggle of establishing a homestead, but whose spirit could still respond to a symphony concert. In addition to tracing individual struggles against external conditions, Willa Cather also explored the internal conflicts which can be as formidable as outside forces. For example, in her Pulitzer Prize novel "One of Ours," a young man had to choose between his obligations to family and land, and his own desire for a formal education. In "The Lost Lady" and "My Mortal Enemy," Willa Cather wrote of imperfect women, yet women whose struggles against their weaknesses revealed a special kind of heroism. (Author/RM)

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Discovering the Exceptional Person Through Willa Cather

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Directors and teachers of social studies programs in the secondary schools often seek ways of enriching the curriculum. Such enrichment does not necessarily require an increase in the amount of information presented. It may be achieved by viewing information from a different perspective. Teachers can sometimes discover additional perspectives by looking to ways knowledge is created and studied in other disciplines. Specifically, teachers of social science may want to consider the approach of creative writers (like Willa Cather)--who inquire into human behavior inductively, by exploring the complexity of individual lives.

Traditionally, social scientists (any many teachers) have proceeded deductively--describing human behavior in terms of averages, norms, and frequency distributions. But some social scientists have dissented. Abraham Maslow criticized the deductive approach because it fails to recognize and appreciate the exceptional person--the heroic individual who innovates, leads, creates, or resists.¹ Charles Hampden-Turner noted that the deductive approach is common because it is relatively easy. Like the man searching for his lost wallet only where the light is best, social scientists often reach conclusions based only on the typical, majority behavior which is most visible.² But, as William J. Bennett comments: "reality doesn't depend on a majority vote."³

Maslow, Hampden-Turner, and others have urged us to adopt an inductive approach to the study of human behavior--an approach which seeks to learn from the exceptional individual. Such an approach does not lend itself to rapid tabulation or generalization, but may come closer to revealing the intricacies of human motivations and behaviors. This inductive manner of perceiving and describing human beings is followed by most creative writers. The authors of great literature have never been interested in quantifying and categorizing human lives, but instead have described the heroism and complexity of individuals. Herman Melville wrote: "take...man alone; and he seems a

wonder, a grandeur, and a woe. But from the same point, take mankind in mass, and for the most part, they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates..."⁴ William Faulkner believed the best writers explore the individual human spirit, which is "capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."⁵

Without necessarily disclaiming the information to be derived from deductive research, teachers in the social sciences may find it helpful to draw illustrations and insights from creative writers--particularly when teaching about leadership, heroism, deviation, and innovation. Bennett concurs when he writes: "Real heroes...may be fictional or factual as long as they embody character, as long as they possess qualities that we instantly recognize as true to human life and worth human attention."⁶

Willa Cather is an example of a writer whose work explores and honors the exceptional person. Willa Cather wrote from her own experiences and observations, and the reality of her characterizations is unmistakable. Through her short stories and novels, Willa Cather spoke of the heroic (but never idealized) person--often in battle with surrounding conditions or his own lesser self.

In My Antonia⁷ and O Pioneers!,⁸ she personalized the history of pioneer Nebraska by revealing the individual anguish and resolve which tamed the land. In "A Wagner Matinee," she honored the grace of a pioneer woman who gave thirty years to the harsh struggle of establishing a homestead, but whose spirit could still respond to a symphony concert.⁹ This theme of a civilized person in uncivilized conditions was explored again in Death Comes for the Archbishop, this time illustrated through one man's struggle against physical and emotional deprivation in the desert of the southwest.¹⁰

1) In addition to tracing individual struggles against external conditions,

2 Willa Cather also explored the internal conflicts which can be as formidable as outside forces. In her Pulitzer Prize novel One of Ours, a young man had to choose between his obligations to family and land, and his own desire for a formal education.¹¹ In The Lost Lady¹² and My Mortal Enemy,¹³ Willa Cather wrote of imperfect women, yet women whose struggles against their own weaknesses revealed a special kind of heroism. In "Old Mrs. Harris"¹⁴ and "The Old Beauty,"¹⁵ she wrote in appreciation of those who grow old with dignity. And in "Paul's Case," she acknowledged the ultimate freedom to choose the manner of one's own death.¹⁶

Willa Cather's realistic characters deserve admiration not for their successes, but for the quality of their struggles. Marcus Klein wrote of her human portrayals: "all struggled toward an image of poised and indisputable greatness, by which everything that cluttered, everything that was tawdry and cheap and small and restricting, would be subdued."¹⁷ In each of these personal struggles, Willa Cather saw the "compassion and sacrifice and endurance" of the individual. Bernice Slote wrote of Willa Cather: "Whatever she found of chaos is balanced by something achieved, something understood."¹⁸

The study of Willa Cather's themes can lead inductively to a better understanding of human behavior at its best. She illustrates Hampden-Turner's definition of a radical person: one who is a reasoning rebel; who may face absurdity, but does not become absurd.¹⁹

✓ She also illustrates Viktor Frankl's thesis that we may not be able to control conditions, but we can always choose our responses to those conditions.²⁰ It is through that ability to respond that individual meaning is affirmed. Such "responsibility" is portrayed consistently in the writings of Willa Cather. Some of her stories are tragic. But in the face of tragedy imposed by a variety of

external conditions and internal conflicts, her men and women seek their own integrity. There is dignity in their struggles and courage in their responses.

Possibly it is the artist's gift to see life inductively--to reveal humanness by exploring the individual person. But that way of seeing is open to all teachers who value the exceptions as much as the norms. Moreover, the teacher who guides a student to such insights can have a profound effect on that student's perception of self and others.

NOTES

1. Abraham Maslow, The Psychology of Science (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
2. Charles Hampden-Turner, Radical Man (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 9-14.
3. William J. Bennett, "Let's Bring Back Heroes," Newsweek 90 (August 15, 1977): 3.
4. Hermann Melville, Moby Dick (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948), p. 461.
5. William Faulkner, "Nobel Prize Address," in The Faulkner Reader (New York: Random House, 1954).
6. Bennett, p. 3.
7. Willa Cather, My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).
8. Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).
9. Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).
10. Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927).
11. Willa Cather, One of Ours (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922).
12. Willa Cather, The Lost Lady (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).
13. Willa Cather, My Mortal Enemy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).
14. Willa Cather, "Old Mrs. Harris," in Obscure Destinies (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930).
15. Willa Cather, "The Old Beauty," in The Old Beauty and Others (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).
16. Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).
17. Marcus Klein, Introduction to My Mortal Enemy (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. vi.
18. Bernice Slote, Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. x.
19. Hampden-Turner, pp. 43-44.
20. Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963).